

Learning Outcomes Assessment Misunderstood: Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full

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If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

A professor walks into a room full of honors students and begins an activity related to the assigned topic of the day. The probability that most of the students in class will enthusiastically engage is probably zero unless the professor has established the relevance of the material and somehow hooked the students with an intriguing question or example. Many students, even honors students, will view any activity as a hassle unless the professor establishes relevance and creates favorable conditions for engagement. Professors are no different when it comes to learning outcomes assessment. When asked to participate in the process, we see a glass half-empty rather than a glass half-full, so we need to start by examining why and how we might change this teaching attitude.

Teaching is a complex, multidimensional activity, requiring faculty to juggle numerous tasks and goals while staying flexible, adjusting agendas, and meeting the needs of students. As Chickering notes, teaching is “arranging the conditions for learning” (25). In honors learner-centered or learning-centered classrooms of the twenty-first century, teaching means selecting content areas, resources, pedagogy, learning experiences, and technology as well as engaging, inspiring, challenging, facilitating, coaching, mentoring, evaluating, and then doing it all over again . . . but better. Transformational teachers (Slavich & Zimbardo) are artists, essayists, and scientists (Finley) who orchestrate a class, take into account the recently changed profile of college students, do the research on learning, motivate students, and assess their path using informal and formal measures such as rubrics. Transformational teachers treat class “like a carefully crafted persuasive essay—with a clear purpose and unique sense of style, a memorable beginning and end, a logical sequence, important content, nimble transitions, and contagious passion. These characteristics persuade students to believe that learning the content and skills really matters” (Finley).

While we all aspire to be the transformational teachers described by Finley, all of us could benefit from taking a mirror to ourselves and re-evaluating our craft in view of student learning outcomes. Many faculty still teach courses not knowing what their expected course learning outcomes are, instead designing courses with random elements that just seem like a good idea for their students. Even more often, professors lack understanding of how the outcomes they are supposed to generate in their courses map to program or institutional outcomes that were promised to the students when they enrolled in the institution and program. Also, what students are learning in our classrooms is sometimes not what we expect them to learn, even with all the well-meaning intentions of the activities we design to meet the planned course objectives. With the escalating costs of college and with families as well as employers asking hard questions about the value of higher education, we need to know where we are going with our students and if we are getting there in our classrooms.

While the recent pressure toward accountability and proof of academic program effectiveness has been driven by legislators, accrediting agencies, and calls for more affordable higher education, the “systematic use of evaluation and assessment has been one of the core principles guiding education” for a long time (Otero & Spurrier 3). In our opinion, all in the academy should consider assessing student learning a worthwhile endeavor; however, some

faculty are not embracing the practice—a sentiment expressed in Joan Digby’s essay in this issue and bemoaned by Greg Lanier in 2008. Reasons for this rejection could be that outcome assessment is not easy or that it is an abstract, hard-to-quantify, multidisciplinary, time-intensive endeavor involving a variety of components. “Assessment is a systematic, on-going, iterative process of monitoring a program or college to determine what is being done well and what needs improvement” (Otero & Spurrier 5). Perhaps some teachers fear assessment as a punitive process with unpleasant consequences or as inconsequential busywork once completed. We may also fear that we are not teaching as well as we like to think we are and that an outcomes assessment process might show inadequacies to our colleagues and ourselves. We cannot afford, however, to feel put-upon or offended by this administrative request, or to be fearful of the process, given the realities of the world we live in.

Faculty comments about assessment often sound something like this: “Assessment? I am not sure what all this emphasis is about, but we do lots of assessment here. I grade my students, they evaluate me after each course, and every five or six years my department gets reviewed. Isn’t that enough? Why are people asking for more?” (Wolff & Harris 271). In 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross introduced a series of stages that we may encounter when we are faced with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. In many ways, the faculty response to assessment has been like grieving (Wolf and Harris). Long gone are the days when faculty could teach with no syllabus and no accountability. Because the accreditation mandate has meant that most university administrations have had to require learning outcomes assessment, many faculty are grieving what they perceive as the lack of focus on teaching, seeing “accountability” mandates as useless and bureaucratic, designed only to satisfy legislatures.

As assessment mandates continue to increase, an underlying and often unspoken assumption is that, because assessment of student learning is now required, someone thinks that faculty are not doing a good job; they must be caught, and change must happen. Looking back thirty or so years, when assessment first became mandated by accreditation, faculty often ignored the mandates, assuming they would go away like any other fad. Now, as higher education is under increasing pressure to demonstrate that students are learning and that a degree is worth the public and private costs, we are moving toward acceptance. According to Margaret Miller, “. . . gradually, then, higher education was coming to a more-or-less reluctant acceptance of the inevitability of assessment. But that acceptance was manifested less as a growing

interest in more sophisticated means of assessment than in a movement of faculty attention from teaching to learning” (6). There are, however, meaningful educational reasons that moving toward a culture of ongoing student-learning outcomes assessment, even in honors, will benefit the college, the university, the faculty, and present and future students.

Assessment in its simplest form is a skill, at one of the highest levels of the Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson *et al.*) which we aspire to develop in all of our students. Many of us, though, shy away from applying this skill ourselves beyond offering assignment/exam grades. If we fail to do learning outcomes assessment in order to evaluate not just our students but ourselves and to determine the success of our entire courses and programs, all we have are the traditional measures of higher education value such as graduation rates, employment statistics, graduate school admission numbers, and student/employer/alumni satisfaction survey results. These measures do not allow us to assess what we did well in our individual courses or programs and thus prevent us from planning for the continuous course/program improvement so critical to the success of our students and institutions.

A culture of assessment and data-based decision-making can have several important consequences. The honors unit can build a shared understanding of its mission and values and of the specific learning outcomes expected of the students. In addition, the decision-making becomes more transparent so that all involved can see why decisions were made and know what data were used and how. Furthermore, decisions are based on information that is important to the college, its faculty, staff, and students since these decisions have been agreed on and are part of the culture. The information from an assessment can then be used in a variety of ways. For example, Truman State University has experienced “profound changes” as a result of institutionalizing assessment efforts (Magruder, McManis, & Young 28). The types of changes that might occur on a specific campus will vary, but, when a program or an institution seriously considers using information about what students are learning and doing, it is better prepared to meet the needs of students in an ever-changing world. As Peter T. Knight suggests,

... assessment is a moral activity. What we choose to assess and how shows quite starkly what we value. In assessing these aspects of chemistry or by assessing German in that way, we are making it abundantly clear what we value in this programme and in higher education in general. So, if we choose not to assess general transferable skills, then

it is an unambiguous sign that promoting them is not seen to be an important part of our work.” (13)

If we look across our own institutions, we will find that much is already being assessed: development funding, grant funding, numbers of students admitted, and student retention. Even if no campus-wide discussion is taking place about the importance of these characteristics, they are being measured and thus matter to our programs. What is often missing from this kind of assessment, though, is an overarching focus on student learning: what, how, and when students learn content, skills, behaviors, and all of what faculty believe is essential to higher education. Without faculty leadership in the student learning-outcomes assessment processes, the quintessential piece of higher education—student learning—is often lost in the barrage of measures, data, and fact-book entries.

Peter T. Knight discusses assessment as being at the heart of an “integrated approach” to learning. The information that comes from meaningful student-learning outcomes assessment lets us know what students are learning, how they are learning, or what they are lacking in terms of knowledge and skills. If we do not know what students are learning, it is very difficult to know what needs to be modified or changed so that students can learn, especially at the departmental or institutional level. Student-learning assessment must therefore be at the heart of higher education, even in honors, because we have to know what and how our students learn. Assessment can provide that information to faculty so that the right decisions can be made and higher education can continue to regain the public trust. Assessment data should inform our decisions at the course and program levels, and it should guide our pedagogical decisions to ensure that our departments, programs, and administrators are making good on the promises we have made to our students and to society as a whole.

As we try to develop intrinsic motivation among the faculty to embrace learning outcomes assessment, perhaps Braskamp & Engberg’s advice about strategy might be a helpful first step. They propose changing the language to promote a “sitting beside” metaphor of assessment as opposed to “standing over”:

Assessment as “sitting beside” reinforces the human element. “Sitting Beside” as an image highlights exchanges and shared responsibility among members of the academy. To “Sit Beside” brings to mind such verbs as to engage, to involve, to interact, to share, and to trust.

While changing the language might be a helpful first step, highlighting the positive effects of the assessment process should closely follow. Faculty should view the outcomes assessment process as an “opportunity” (Hillesheim 5) to take time from our day-to-day teaching/research/service activities and do what we as academics seldom have the chance to do: reflect on our craft. Reflection, as we all know, leads to deeper learning and has transformational potential. Time spent on learning outcomes assessment, whether in an honors course or program, offers an opportunity to realize a variety of benefits.

Several benefits result from learning outcomes assessments. The obvious benefits include the following:

1. improving student learning and development,
2. identifying outdated/redundant curricula, and
3. rejuvenating teaching approaches.

Less obvious or direct results might include these benefits:

1. uncovering different perspectives on what we do that might be helpful in our work,
2. developing a professional identity as a faculty or a program,
3. developing an agenda for achievement of excellence in one's field,
4. communicating a commitment to our students through self-examination, thus building their buy-in,
5. empowering faculty by giving them a voice in the course/program redesign,
6. building internal and external community through the collaboration that assessment necessitates,
7. discovering new collaborative partners in the assessment taskforce community,
8. gaining institutional support,
9. increasing available resources,
10. more closely aligning management practices with needs,
11. showcasing faculty/program achievements,
12. creating opportunities for self-promotion,

13. gaining outside validation of our work,
14. finding new friends and supporters for the work we do, and
15. building the community's respect through publication of self-study results.

When faculty and the community can see the data about student learning and discover what and how students are learning, they experience a transformational moment. Faculty often see critical thinking, for example, as an important goal in honors, but we need to explain how, where, and when it is taught directly; how students have learned it; and how we know that they have learned it.

When a measurement tool reliably and appropriately measures an outcome, the data become useful and critical thinking becomes more than a nice concept. Faculty members begin to talk about how to increase student skills in an area, they share pedagogies, and they may participate in program-wide workshops or discussions. The walls that often surround an individual faculty member's classroom can come down, and student learning can become the important focus. Faculty may also start to look for new teaching methods that measure student learning in authentic ways. These types of transformative conversations and actions can make major changes in the culture of an honors college or program. We believe that faculty members desire transformational teaching and learning and that our list of assessment benefits, along with the "sitting beside" metaphor, can help honors faculty see the value of this practice. If faculty can find the task relevant and engaging, they might thus view this exercise more as a glass half-full rather than half-empty.

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